



Title: Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment: a Guide for Local Authorities on Enhancing Capacity for Public Participation

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SCS topic headings: Personal Safety; Home Safety; Travel Safety; Safety in Public Spaces; Environment Safety; Partnership Working; Community Engagement; Evaluation and Monitoring

[This document is a REVIEW of research conveyed into 'good practice' guidance.](#)

Summary of the intervention's aim

The main audience for this guide is local councils. The advice is aimed at departments, units or individual officers concerned with promoting democratic engagement, and is also highly relevant to elected members.

The main research aim was to identify areas where guidance would be useful to local authorities, and to report these – with suitable case study illustrations – in good practice guidance. The research set out to address the following questions:

- What is motivating local authorities to develop civic education activities beyond schools, and what forms of civic education are they providing?
- Who is providing these activities, either internally within councils, or in collaboration with other actors?
- What makes for successful civic education and how is success being defined and measured?
- What are the barriers that local authorities face in delivering effective civic education? How should good practice be disseminated?

Outcomes

This guide provides advice on what local authorities can do to support learning for effective citizenship and suggests further ways that councils can support people in learning how they can become more involved.

Guidance is presented on the entire process of engaging with communities and promoting citizenship, alongside perspectives to better understanding citizen and organisational cultures too.

The guide is divided into seven chapters, each of which reflects a key challenge in promoting effective citizenship:

1. Effective citizenship: explains why helping the public to become more effective citizens is a key issue for local authorities, and how it fits with current government policy.
2. Learning and citizenship: sets out the importance of formal and informal approaches to learning about effective citizenship, and stresses that councils can reinforce people's learning experience by making sure their approach to public participation is meaningful and effective.
3. Tailoring initiatives to the target audience: introduces ways of developing learning initiatives that reflect the needs of different social groups, with particular reference to young people, marginalised and under-represented sections of society, and 'the silent majority'.
4. Changing Council Culture: explains how councils might adjust their internal culture, structure and ways of working to foster effective citizenship, including the coordination of public involvement activities, issues of staffing, and the training of officers and elected members.
5. Measuring Success: considers how to evaluate whether the public has become better informed or empowered as a result of citizenship initiatives, and whether councils are becoming more sensitive to citizen input.
6. Sustainability: shows how it takes time to build the confidence and capacity needed to enable people to become effective citizens.
7. Links and contacts: provides links to key sources where further information on good practice can be found.

The guide can be read as a whole, or readers can turn to sections that are most relevant to their needs and interests. To illustrate the main points, real-life examples of activities are presented which have successfully enhanced capacities for engagement in local decision-making.

Summary of evaluation conclusions

- Increasing evidence identifies the benefits of an active and engaged citizenry that gets involved in local decision-making. Harnessing the insights, perspectives and talents of local people can improve services, the quality of democracy, and the legitimacy of council leadership. There can be benefits to participants, too.
- To reinforce people's willingness to get involved in local decision-making, opportunities for participation must be seen to be meaningful, open to influence, and to value citizen input.
- Despite using a growing range of consultation and participation techniques, more than half of residents believe that their local council has not consulted them in the past year.
- Involving people in the design of learning activities can make them more effective. But different ways of informing or empowering people work better in different contexts, and for different social groups. It is important to pay particular attention to ways of supporting effective citizenship for young people, other marginalised groups, and the 'silent majority'.
- It is important to make learning opportunities accessible; give careful attention to language; set out clearly what is at stake; build on capacities that are already in place; sustain the dialogue, and give feedback to people when they do participate in decision-making.
- Promoting effective citizenship requires processes of learning that enable all parties to reflect upon – and learn from – their experiences.
- Initiatives to support effective citizenship are likely to be more effective if the council's whole culture and organisation demonstrably values and encourages citizen input. Actions that may help include coordinating participation initiatives within councils (and between partners), having the right staff with the right remit, promoting learning within organisations, developing the roles of elected members, decentralised structures, education for local governance and building the capacity of social networks.

- Building the necessary trust and capacity for people to become effective citizens is a time-consuming process, and it is important to maintain the momentum once it has been developed.
- Success can be evaluated through ‘hard’, quantifiable indicators of cohesion, inclusion and influence on decisions; ‘soft’, qualitative measures of personal learning and development; and by citizens themselves through participatory evaluation.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

The background research to the guidance which provided the sampling base and initial leads for the guidelines has provided useful insights in its own right, and it is this research that is published by the same authors with the reference and internet link below.

Andrews, R., Cowell, R., Downe, J., Martin, S. and Turner, D. (2006) Supporting effective citizenship at local authority level: Background research for good practice guidelines, ‘Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment’. Department for Communities and Local Government: London. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/151060.pdf> Accessed July 2011.

Three stages structured the data collection and incorporated a range of methods.

Stage 1 sought to specify the definition of ‘civic education’, and identify initial lines of investigation, involving:

- An extensive literature review was produced, entitled ‘Civic Education and Local Government: A Literature Review’. It examined existing literature, including academic, government and practitioner-based analyses of Civic Education in the UK, as well as relevant international experience. It also considered evidence from within and beyond the UK to current British policy debates about citizenship and local decision-making. The full review and accompanying summary can be obtained at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1137166>.
- an initial expert seminar in February 2004, with invited representatives from academia, government departments and agencies, local authorities and think-tanks, followed by individual interviews with eight national experts.

- creating an internet bulletin board to allow people to suggest and exchange ideas.
- placing articles in the local government press, inviting authorities to send the research team information about their approaches to Civic Education.

Stage 2 involved a broad-based survey, again with the prime objective of identifying potentially interesting practices in the broad field of civic education, which could become the subject of more intensive investigation. The research conducted a survey of 44 local authority websites. A short questionnaire was sent to all local authorities in England.

Stage 3 provides more details about specific local authority civic education practices: what councils were doing; how it was being delivered; whether it was effective or not; and the factors behind this level of success.

- The research team conducted 33 telephone interviews with key practitioners identified through earlier stages of the research.
- The research team also conducted nine case studies, each with a different local authority, and involving interviews with council officers, elected members, officers from other bodies and focus groups with members of the public.
- The research team conducted 33 telephone interviews with key practitioners identified through earlier stages of the research.

Research methodology– How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

	Evaluation sample	Methodology	Ethical considerations	Selection bias	Credible conclusions
Level 1					
Level 2			x	x	
Level 3	x	x			x

Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org.uk

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